In 2002, the UK Government published an ‘official’ definition of social enterprise (SE) which was also adopted in Scotland. The ensuing 15 years has seen a dramatic rise in the popularity of SE - but the government definition was never invested with sufficient authority to be effective.

The meaning of social enterprise has been gradually eroded by the casual use of the term by a widening range of people. It is used by private businesses as a brand to access particular markets; by local authorities establishing arms length subsidiaries; it is even being eroded by third sector organisations which set the bar too low.

In response, the Scottish SE community has set down the values and behaviours by which we recognise each other. We refer to this document as a voluntary code of practice - or simply the Code.

The aim of the code is to set a benchmark – that establishes clear blue water, between SE and, particularly, the private sector. This centres on the unequivocal affirmation of the defining characteristics – that SE’s don’t distribute dividends.

www.se-code.net
There are five essential elements of a social enterprise.

1. A social enterprise is a trading business – selling goods and services – but whose primary objective is to achieve social and/or environmental benefit. SEs are different from those charities and voluntary organisations which do not aspire to financial independence through trading.

2. Regardless of its legal form, the constitution of a SE will include the requirement that profits are reinvested in the business or in the beneficiary community – and not distributed to private owners, shareholders or investors. (See FAQs)

3. The constitution will always require that on dissolution, the assets of the SE are reinvested in another organisation with similar aims and objectives. Taken together Criteria 2 and 3 are referred to as the ‘asset lock’ – the defining characteristic of a SE – which distinguishes it from the private sector.

4. SEs are constituted and managed in an accountable and transparent way – particularly with regard to the community they serve.

5. SEs are distinct from the public sector and cannot be the subsidiary of a public body.

Sign up to the SE Code at www.se-code.net/subscribers

**Values & Behaviours**

Value-based
SEs are businesses founded on core values – that social fairness and the protection of the planet should be pre-conditions of all economic activity – with all business practices expected to be honest and fair.

Good Employers
SEs are good employers – who continually strive to offer a dignified workplace experience; aiming to pay a 'living wage'; and having flatter pay structures than the private sector. SEs do not pay inequitable salaries to senior management; a maximum ratio of 1:5 between lowest and highest is a useful guide.

Democratic
From Co-ops and mutuals, SEs have learned the benefits of common ownership and democratic governance. This is the primary model of the social economy in continental Europe.

Empowerment
From the Development Trusts and Community Enterprise sectors, SEs have learned about bottom up responses to social problems and how they empower local communities.

Collaboration
Within the common sense of running a competitive business – SEs try to help and support one another – in the spirit of the Open Source IT community. SEs will also, where possible, encourage the practice of intra-trading i.e. procuring local goods and services from within the sector itself.